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ABSTRACT

Among the most notable aspects of the educational reform movement are the efforts by government, corporate, and philanthropic leaders to establish academic standards. This paper addresses two questions: (1) Why is it important for the Catholic high schools of America to set standards and improve assessments? and (2) What types of standards and assessments should schools seek to establish? The paper concludes that Catholic high schools are faced with the challenges of more actively engaging the public, deciding how closely Catholic high school standards should be aligned with public standards, reforming assessment practices, and developing evaluation approaches beyond sorting and screening. (LMI)

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American Educational Reform and The Catholic High School: Standards, Assessment, Achievement

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NCEA TALK

I. Introduction

A few years from now when American historians settle down to write about the closing decades of the 20th century, I sometimes wonder what they will find to be important enough to paint the pages of high school cybertext books. I imagine that such topics as (1) The Civil Rights Act; (2) The Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars; (3) The high technology booms of personal computing and electronic mail; (4) Black Tuesday and then the unprecedented growth of the Dow Jones Industrial Average, until recently, that is; 5) the end of the Cold War; 6) the Oklahoma City Bombing; and of course, (7) the opening of the Vatican's Wide Web site on Easter Sunday of 1997.

Just as the most vital education issues concerning education find it challenging to reach the front pages of our morning newspapers, they will find it equally tough finding space in the closing chapters of 20th century history books. What gives us hope, however, are 1) the education-reform movement of the 80's and 90's, and 2) the fact that we still have a little more than three and a half years left to make our mark.

Education Reform

Among the most notable aspects of the educational reform movement are the efforts by government, corporate, and philanthropic leaders to reverse the trend of declining quality of America's schools and the trend of declining achievement among American youth. Alarming data from such educational assessments as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and the International Assessment of Educational Progress (IAEP), and the Third International Assessment of Mathematics and

Science, convinces the nation of the need to set goals and establish standards in order to improve the quality of schools and to prepare America's youth for living, working, and advancing the quality of life in the 21st century. Compared to all other data sources and indicators (drop-out rates) college going, etc., these assessment instruments which report student achievement can be credited with both generating the most illuminating and powerful evidence about our educational quality and conditions, and more for being the standards that propel us to set goals for making progress. NAEP has also provided the important information that policy makers use to marshal public support for school and educational reforms. I also believe that the standards and assessments movement may be our ticket into the 20th century history books and the front pages of our newspapers.

Now, in order to do justice to our present history, and to give education a fair chance to compete with the likes of Hale Bopp, Branch Davidian, and Watergate, several actions need to be taken by our colleagues and us. We are accustomed to instruments that help us screen and sort students, (Honors, A, B, C, D) but, what we need to think about is new assessment instruments and techniques to help us set educational achievement goals, initiate educational reforms, measure our academic progress toward achieving the goals, and produce report cards that help us convey to the public the quality of standards and performance we are achieving. This will become extremely important as parents sit down with their children to choose which schools to attend, and to determine whether they are being adequately prepared for postsecondary education, work, and life in the next century, and also important as catholic schools seek to attract new student markets.

Allow me for a moment to make an attempt at persuasion about new standards and assessments, by illustrating the powerful role that assessment has played in the

American education reform movement and describe some of the major actions that have resulted even with the absence of standards. Then I would like to suggest to you the power of an essential component, that is the use of accepted standards to set goals, measure and report progress. And finally, I will suggest what I think are some important challenges that you and I must confront in order to establish more meaningful standards and assessments.

The two subtle questions that my remarks might be construed to address are:

1) Why is it important for the Catholic high schools of America to set standards and improve assessments; and

2) What types of standards and assessments should schools seek to establish?

The role of Standards and Assessments in recent American Education reforms, and the contemporary use of assessments to propel reform can be traced to 1983 and the National Commission on Excellence in Education, but the lack of standards caused problems. After concluding in 1983, for example, that the demise in the quality of America's schools place the nation at risk not only of losing its long-standing preeminence in the worlds of commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation, but also pose's a threat to its prosperity, security, and civility. The National Commission on Excellence in Education presented the following assessment-related results to convey the quality and status of American education:

- 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest test of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension.

- About 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent.
- Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched.
- Over half the population of gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable achievement in school.
- Many 17-year-olds do not possess the "higher order" intellectual skills we should expect of them.
- There was a steady decline in science achievement scores of U.S. 17-year-olds as measured by the National Assessment of Science in 1969, 1973, and 1977 and The National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983.

In 1989, The Commission on Standards for School mathematics of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM, 1989) attributed the low performance of American's school youth to the lack of standards. While it has been very useful to various study groups and national commissions to have access to assessment results to reveal the status and condition of education, these assessments have had severe limitations.

First, no goals had been established for how many people were expected to achieve at the levels reported. So, in a sense, anything was acceptable.

Second, the assessments were normative and peoples' performance compared to each other was the most important indicator of achievement.

Third, subjective standards were not established through a consensus process that revealed how much knowledge and skill was expected at each grade level and in each subject.

The Need for New Assessment Instruments for Schools

Among the most important ingredients missing from the present reforms are the appropriate assessment tools. New assessment instruments and procedures are needed by the schools in order to conduct the following three vital functions: 1) measure their educational status and compare their achievement with national standards and with other schools; 2) set new goals and benchmarks that are relevant and appropriate not only for our own communities and circumstances; and 3) measure and report progress toward achieving our own goals and the goals of states and the nation. The need for such instruments and procedures has been widely recognized and recommended, they have yet to be developed.

The Southern Regional Education Board (1988) observed that every state has implemented programs to improve the quality of education, but "few have set specific goals for the results they expect." The SREB makes a very convincing argument about why setting goals and measuring progress are vital in school reform efforts.

Since that time enormous progress has been made and yet much more progress is needed toward establishing standards and assessments that are useful for improving schools and student performance.

Progress includes the following four:

1) National goals for student achievement at each grade and subject;

2) The use of criterion referenced assessment instead of solely normative;
3) The establishment of student performance standards known as achievement levels that are developed by the National Assessment; and
4) A broader range of assessment types are now being used such as essays, constructed response; and extended constructed response.

Our National Education Goals, for example, state that our students are expected to achieve a proficiency of performance at grades four, eight, and twelve, in math, science, reading, writing, history, and geography. Using the National Assessment Governing Board Achievement levels we can set goals and measure our progress.

Three questions emerge at this point.

How do we translate the idea of standards at the global/national level into a useful practice of setting standards, constructing and administering assessments, and producing report cards at the individual school level? And, how should the individual school level standards connect with the national standards? And, what is likely to be the value added from an investment into establishing standards and new assessment practices.

Translating the Idea of Standards into Practice

In her 1995 book, National Standards in American Education: A Citizen Guide, Diane Ravitch observes that when testing experts gather to decide which topics to include in international assessments they must agree both about what is taught and what should be taught in their subject. I'll add a second point to Ravitch's by simply replacing the word taught with the word assessed. Taken together, these concepts of taught and assessed convey what we want students to achieve and how we choose to know our level of progress.

The Catholic Schools of America, like all others, are also forced to address these questions. That is, if international and national standards are being established in the fields of mathematics and science and national standards of what children are expected to know and be able to perform in other subjects, then are the Catholic high schools going to adopt comparable standards for all its students or will they be different? Will Catholic schools embrace or shun national standards of achievement? Table 1 -- Community Service – is this a good enough standard for Catholic schools? Will the Catholic high schools of America apply its best academic and social standards to all of its students or distinguish between the college bound and others? This is a consensus building process that could engage the teachers and leaders of schools throughout the nation or clusters of schools within states or regions.

We have evolved in the past decade to think about standards in two important ways: 1) content standards, and 2) performance standards. Content standards are descriptions of the specific knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn in each subject discipline. These must be accessible to parents and students and must also be measurable.

Performance standards then describe the extent of student success in achieving the content standards. These are subjective judgments about how acceptable we judge student performance to be.

The task before the nation's schools in the short time remaining in this century is to make progress toward setting and measuring progress on content and performance standards. Now to some degree we can argue that our teachers have always practiced these activities and have communicated these standards to parents and students as part of

their normal practice. But, there are several forces at work that cause these activities to be different today than in the past:

1) More demand for public accountability;
2) More concern about all students achieving at the highest levels rather than just a few;
3) More interest in accountability; and
4) The growth in demand for knowledge and information.
5) The demand for greater coordination and efficiency.

So the challenge is before us -- des

1) More active public engagement
2) Public standards
3) Reform of our Assessment Practices
4) Think about approaches that help us move far beyond sorting and screening.